

Thomas Downs

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Interviewed by Brian McDevitt

Transcribed by Brian McDevitt

Edited by Alex Swanson & Leah Cohen

Web biography by Alex Swanson

Production by Brad Guidera & Angel Melendez

Downs: Hello?

McDevitt: Mr. Downs?

Downs: Who is this?

McDevitt: This is Brian McDevitt with the Pritzker Military Museum...

Downs: The what?

McDevitt: Brian McDevitt with the Pritzker Military Museum, we were going to...

Downs: I am sorry, I'm not going to, no more 'til next year, goodbye.

McDevitt: No...

Downs: Hello?

McDevitt: Mr. Downs, I'm sorry to call you back, I don't mean to disrupt your day.

Downs: But you are.

McDevitt: I know, but we had an interview scheduled for today and I was just calling to see...

Downs: Oh, you're that outfit.

McDevitt: Yes, Sir; Yes Sir.

Downs: Okay.

McDevitt: Sorry about that. How are you doing this morning?

Downs: Well, as you can see, I'm kind of crabby.

McDevitt: Yeah, well that's all right, 'tis the season, you know, it's a stressful season. But I just wanted to give you a call and say thank you for giving us some time today, and is there...before we start, is there anything that you...I realize you want to kinda just stick to the military part of your background, is there anything that you specifically don't want to talk about, or do want to talk about, during this interview?

Downs: Well, I worked for the AT&T company, I was an engineer department head in a factory, and I probably spent more of my time there than I did in the military.

McDevitt: Sure...all right, because basically what we do is...I would like to make this as informal as possible, you know. To give you a little about myself, I just got out of the Marine Corps last year -- I was a linguist -- I did two tours in Afghanistan and I'm here because I love history and I enjoy hearing people's stories, and I...you know, I think Americana is something...Americana and community are two of the biggest things for me. And I love hearing people's descriptions of events and what they think about how things transpired. So if you don't mind, I would like to get a little background of your family, like if you had brothers or sisters that served as well?

Downs: No brothers or sisters.

McDevitt: Okay. All right then, we can make this as short and sweet as you like to, if you need to take a break or anything just please let me know. And for your information we will be recording this interview, and as soon as we record it will put it on a CD for you, and we'll transcribe the entire thing out, and after it's transcribed we will send you a copy and you can cross out whatever you don't want to be on our website, and well make as many copies for you and your family as you guys would like.

Downs: Okay.

McDevitt: All right. So, all right, we will start it up here. My name is Brian McDevitt, I'm with the Pritzker Military Museum, today is December 15th, and I'm here with Thomas Anthony Downs who was in the 15th Army Air Force during World War II and was with the Strategic Air Command in the Korean War. How are you doing today, Sir?

Downs: I'm fine, thank you.

McDevitt: And to start out, when and where were you born?

Downs: I was born in Chicago in 1923, April 30th.

McDevitt: And what part of Chicago were you growing up in?

Downs: The Southwest Side.

McDevitt: So this was during the Great Depression, yes?

Downs: Right.

McDevitt: Can you tell me a little bit about the neighborhood, and what people had to do to deal with the Great Depression?

Downs: Well, I can't really speak to what they did...let's see, would you repeat the question please? I'm sorry.

McDevitt: Well, maybe better from your perspective...was there anything your family did to cope with the Great Depression? Did your mother work, or what did your father do at the time?

Downs: Well, my father was a policeman in the Chicago Police Department, and they didn't pay in money during the really tough times, they paid in scrip, which was a promised pay and you'd...certain stores would take that scrip money and would give you groceries or whatever else you needed...and I went to Saint Justin Martyr, a great school where I met some really nice people, and they had a tremendous influence on my life. Some of them I kept contact with until they passed away. And I went to Tillman Technical High School, and that was on the South Side of Chicago, and it was a great school at the time, and they had what...all the things that I wanted. A friend of mine was anxious to be an engineer and he went there, so I went there, and I had all math and physics and chemistry and language to get me into college, and I graduated in 1941. And I had an acceptable average to go to most schools, but unfortunately, we weren't able to afford it at the time, so I took some menial jobs and then, of course, the war came along, and I registered for the draft and after a while I decided I'd better do something about it, so I went down and I took the test for the Air Force -- Air Corps flight training -- and I passed that and I was called in on December '43. Went through -- they changed the program -- I went through basic training and they sent me to Stillwater, Oklahoma, to what was then Oklahoma...what was then, and I was there three or four months, and we learned how to march

and do all kinds of...you know, military things, and we also had classroom and mathematics, and navigation, weather, and a few things like that. Then they sent me down to San Antone [San Antonio], where I passed the test for flight training...excuse me, and then I decided to be a bombardier. So I qualified for that and they sent me off to preflight, and I got through it in early '44...and then they sent me up at Casper, Wyoming, and I joined a B-24 crew out there as a bombardier, and I was lucky to have a pilot who had flown before as a private pilot. He was pretty good, and we went overseas in early '44 and we flew. Well, we flew twenty missions and we bailed out in Hungary, and we were lucky enough to walk through and get with the Russians. And then we went back to the 15th Air Force, and we flew one more mission, and then we were sent home, and after a time I was asked to be separated, and I joined the [US] Reserves. And in all, military-wise, I spent twenty good years as a reservist, which included being called up for the Korean War. I was sent to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, where I was assigned a seat on a C, then a B-50, and I was also a personnel equipment officer, which made me responsible for navigation equipment, flight suits, and that sort of thing. I got out at the end of '52 and subsequently, went to work for the Western Electric Company and ended up out in Montgomery, Illinois, where I was responsible for the engineering, and I had people working for me there and it was a very satisfying job. My wife talked me into retiring when I was sixty, and we -- Sally and I -- we had four children, and they're all really great people and they help us now, and they...most of them live in the Chicago area, one of them lives out in Aurora, Colorado, he was here for a couple weeks, and my son in Downers Grove, he was where for a week and helped take care of me and Mama, and so we've been very lucky in that respect. And we have six grandchildren, and five great-grand[children], and that's the...that's pretty much it, so if you have any questions, I'd be glad to try to answer them.

McDevitt: Sure, now you said you met your wife when you were in elementary school, is that correct?

Downs: Oh no, negative, I met her after service, I met her in 1947 and we married.

McDevitt: Okay, well in your...you said you had some really good group of friends when you were younger. What was the transition...well, first off, you were in high school when Pearl Harbor happened, correct? Or had you graduated already?

Downs: No, I graduated in 1940...yes, I graduated already. '41, I graduated in June '41.

McDevitt: Can you describe what the feeling was after Pearl Harbor?

Downs: Well, you know, as best I can remember I had a lot of friends that joined the service, some of them didn't make it through, they died at Anzio or various places over in the Far East. I felt it was my duty to go into the service, I was in good health and there was no reason why I shouldn't.

McDevitt: What were you doing at the time? Because you had graduated high school. Were you working?

Downs: Yes, I worked. I couldn't afford to go to college.

McDevitt: What kind of work were you doing?

Downs: Oh, just menial factory work.

McDevitt: Was it...was that also down on the South Side?

Downs: I guess, more or less, yeah.

McDevitt: So you signed up for the draft, and were you drafted, or did you enlist?

Downs: Well I covered that, I enlisted.

McDevitt: What do you remember from basic training? Can you describe it? Was it an entirely different experience?

Downs: Have you been through basic training? [Laughter]

McDevitt: Yes Sir, I have.

Downs: Okay, good, you answered my question...and that answers my question, it was an entirely different experience. I was a Chicago boy, and I met a lot of people from all over the country, and they were illiterate, and I used to help them write their letters home. And the training was pretty rough, they got us out early in the morning, and all kinds of stuff like that.

McDevitt: Sure, and what was the...are there any specific funny stories you like to tell about basic training?

Downs: God, I don't remember anything about basic training that was funny, to tell you the truth. You see, I signed up and I was accepted, I passed the various tests, but then they changed the program because the [US] Army said, "You either take

them in or were going to take them and train them as infantry officers,” because they needed those...they needed them for the invasion [Normandy]. So in order to cover them, they pulled us in, put us through basic training, and sent us off to a college, and the program was called ASTP, I think, or something.

McDevitt: Yes, the Army Specialized Training Program.

Downs: Yeah.

McDevitt: And where did they send you first? I’m sorry, was it Stillwater?

Downs: Yeah, Oklahoma A&M [established as land grant college].

McDevitt: So you were able to get your college education that you wanted with the military?

Downs: Negative, no. Well, let’s say that it was responsible for my college training after I got out of the service, I went to college on the GI Bill.

McDevitt: What was the one thing you wanted to study when you were in high school? You wanted to go to college, did you know what you wanted your career to be in?

Downs: Engineering.

McDevitt: So you get sent to Stillwater, and you’re going through this training...is that the flight training? Have they already selected you for this role at this time?

Downs: Well, it was just...you might say it was like a holding tank, they had to do something to get people in and, you know...we marched, we took physical training, and we did some flight training -- we did navigation and weather and a few things like that -- and that was at A&M. And then from there, I went down to San Antone [San Antonio] and went through classification. There I was eligible for pilot, navigation, and bombardier, and I liked to take the easy way out, and took so I thought that bombardiering [would be easiest].

McDevitt: Now, if you can, can you describe for me what your duties were as a bombardier?

Downs: Well, my duties as a bombardier were...was to...first of all, we went to briefing... for bombardiers, and I had to study that. It showed the location of the target and the initial point where we turned in to the target, and it gave us various information like altitude, expected temperatures and a few things, and after take

off and on our way to the target we had certain books that gave us information that we had to put into the bombsight based on the temperature and a few things like that, and after we turned, the additional point -- the bombsight, the Norden bombsight -- just over the target, in fact, just over the airplane...And we had a chill for drift, and then we had a...we had two -- two hairs, you might say, we had to concentrate on... One of them that guided us to the target, and until the drift -- when we looked down to earth, if the airplane was drifting right or left and we had to turn into that and get that stopped. And then we had to...the other one [hair like object] accommodated for ground speed, and we had to set that up and then we had to open the bomb bay doors and make sure it was suitable for dropping the bombs. And we had a target [corrects himself] twitter? [not sure of word] on the bombsight - we had to set that. And then we had to get back and reset everything, make sure the drift killed and had the groundspeed into the bombsight, and then after, "Bombs away" [phrase denoting bombs were released], we closed the doors and turned the airplane back to the pilot.

McDevitt: And, before the war, had you ever flown? Before, had you ever been on a plane?

Downs: Negative.

McDevitt: So the flight training, if you will, can kind of you walk me through that process? Like, how they got you used to...did you...were there any flight simulators that you took part in? Can you just tell me about the process of training you up, getting you up to speed before you shipped out?

Downs: Well you know, they had preflight, and that, you know, was mostly ground school, and they had...from the trainers that we used in hangars, and they had a bombsight modeled out, and the trainer was able to simulate flying conditions into a target, and we had the bombsight set up and zeroed in on a target, and...oh, then the next part of the training was pretty much the same but different location...we went to the final training where we actually started dropping some bombs, and I was not used to flying, and was down in Texas, that was pretty rough. But I was lucky, I didn't get airsick or anything like that. Anyway, we spent a week camping, tent camped.

McDevitt: Was that training for...in case of the eventuality that you went down overseas? Was that kind of survival training?

Downs: Oh no, that wasn't survival training. I know what you're talking about, but no, that wasn't that, it was... I'm not really sure what the purpose of that was, but I guess it was...when I went overseas, I ended up in a tent, so I guess they got me used to tent living.

McDevitt: And so what kind of gear did you guys have? Because it would get extremely cold when you were flying at those altitudes, so what kind of gear did you have to keep you from freezing to death up there?

Downs: That's a good question. We had electric suits, that included booties and pants, and the booties plugged into the pants, and we had a jacket that went over and that plugged in, and then there was a long cord that plugged into the electric system on the airplane -- I believe it was twelve volts -- and then, you know, we have goggles and a helmet, and it was pretty comfortable, and we had an oxygen mask that we had to wear above 10,000 feet. And some of the missions went twelve hours, and I was pretty lucky to get out of there and get on the ground, so we gave the "O" [officer] club a few bucks.

McDevitt: Was it pretty cramped quarters in the B-24? Did you have to worry about that, the lines connecting the electric suit to all the gear?

Downs: Well, we plugged into the oxygen system and the electric system, and I don't remember that as being a problem. The main problem was the other guys.

McDevitt: Such as the other positions within the bomber?

Downs: No, that was the other guys who were flying small airplanes. They were called Germans and then they shot up flak, for some reason, they were mad at us. We finally got hit by flak pretty bad over Vienna, and we couldn't get back across the Adriatic, so we took her down into Hungary and we bailed out at about 7,000 feet, and I was very lucky that I was able to guide the parachute down, near some very tall oak trees, and as soon as I got level with the top of the oak trees... I gave down shroud lines, I landed in snow, and it was just like jumping off a chair. One of the...some of the people got pretty well banged up, and for some reason or another, they didn't handle that.

McDevitt: Yeah. If you will, can you kind of tell me...when you went overseas, you were stationed in Bari, Italy, is that correct?

Downs: Yeah, actually near Bari, Cerignola.

McDevitt: And what was your AO [area of operations] like? Where did you guys fly to? Like, what was the majority, because you said you did about twenty missions while you were there, was there one area you went to more often? Can you describe the AO for me?

Downs: More often, probably...you know, that's a hard one to answer, I don't remember all the targets, but there were targets.

McDevitt: Was it mostly like, the Austria area, or were you doing a lot of targets in Italy at the time?

Downs: We did a few Italy targets, not very many, most of them were in southern Europe, how about that?

McDevitt: And how big was a crew on a B-24?

Downs: Ten.

McDevitt: Ten. And did you...were you trained up on any of the other positions, or were you specifically just a bombardier? Did you know how to do any of the other stuff on the plane?

Downs: Well, I had a responsibility for the gunners, so I was supposed to be an expert in the .50 caliber machine gun.

McDevitt: And your position in the plane is up near the front, correct? You're kind of underneath the cockpit?

Downs: Yeah...well, there was a little side tunnel that I crawled through to get up to the nose. In later models, they put a gun turret in there, and so I had...I shared that area with the gun turret and the gunner.

McDevitt: So, can you...what's a normal day like for you in Italy...say, a normal day when you got a flight coming up. Can you walk me through the process of the briefings and the pre-checks and all that?

Downs: You want me to go...you want to know about the day we flew a mission?

McDevitt: Sure. Yes, please.

Downs: Okay. They rouse us at four o'clock in the morning, which was strictly against my ordinary type of living. We went to the latrine and did our duty there, and then

we had a breakfast, and then they put on trucks and sent us over to a group headquarters, where we receive the briefing from one of the group officers, and then they handed out the information for pilots, navigators, bombardiers, and then we were trucked to the flight line where we...where we got the heated suits, the parachutes.

McDevitt: Did you guys pack your own parachutes, or were they done for you?

Downs: Oh, that was done. And we got the necessary flight gear, the heated suits and the other warm suits we wore over that, and then we went out to the airplane, and we preflighted the airplane...we preflighted to our position, engineer, bombardier, pilot, and then we waited for engine start time, and they would shoot up flares from the control tower...depending on what came up, and so we start engines and then eventually we'd taxi out to the runway and take off at five minute intervals, and we would climb to 2,000 feet and make a left turn -- half a needle width to the left -- and join the formation, and once the formation was formed we started out towards the target and climbed to whatever the bombing altitude was...it was generally around 24,000 feet.

McDevitt: And did you meet up with escorts along the way? Did you guys have fighter pilot escorts?

Downs: Yes, we did. We have some of the men from the P-51...from that...the Negro unit, the red [tail]¹...

McDevitt: The Tuskegee unit.

Downs: Yeah, yeah. And they were really great, really super pilots. They made flying a lot safer for us.

McDevitt: And did you ever interact with those guys on the ground?

Downs: Never saw them, no, they were on a different base and at that time, believe it or not, racial segregation was very much a part of the military. When I went through flight school, all our meals were served by Negroes, and the Negroes generally had pretty menial jobs.

¹ The Tuskegee Airmen were African American and Caribbean service men and women who made up the 332nd Fighter Group and the 477th Bombardment Group, during WWII. The airmen flew the P-51 Mustang which was distinguished by its red tail.

McDevitt: Yeah, they were kind of relegated to logistics and service industry in the military.

Downs: Yes, and I Eleanor Roosevelt, I think, was responsible for the Tuskegee project.

McDevitt: Now, as part of the ASTP, there was kind of a...That program came to an end shortly after you went through it. Did notice...was there a lot of...did you get any derision from any of the other guys for going through that program? Because I know a lot of the enlisted guys didn't care for the ASTP.

Downs: God, I don't remember anything like that. I always had a good relationship with the enlisted, the gunners on the crew...I remain...our crew remained in contact with each other for many, many years, and we enjoyed each other's company, and, you know, military order was a heck of a lot easier to keep than it was on the ground, that was a whole different situation, and rarely did we have a problem with anybody. They knew they had to do their job and we just left them alone, let them do it.

McDevitt: What was the...

Downs: Huh.

McDevitt: Go ahead, go ahead. I'm sorry to cut you off.

Downs: Well, [laughs] our radio operator was a little troublesome, but he got the job done, anyway. His personal life was a little screwed up, but okay.

McDevitt: What was the...what was the breakdown, you had a crew of ten, how many officers to enlisted?

Downs: Oh, it was pretty high, the full pilot, copilot, navigator, bombardier, were all officers, and we were second lieutenants when we went over, and after about ten missions we got promoted to first, and I got out as a first, never got promoted beyond that...no, I never had any problem with enlisted people.

McDevitt: And who was your pilot, was he...was he the highest rank on the flight?

Downs: We were all the same rank, first lieutenants...but, you know, the pilot is in charge of the aircraft regardless of his rank. He can be a first lieutenant and have a colonel sitting next to him in the copilot's seat, and that colonel better do what that pilot tells him to do.

McDevitt: And did you get along really well with your pilot? It was First Lieutenant Howell, correct?

Downs: Yes. Yes, he and I were pretty good friends, and we remained friends after the war. And he was a pretty successful guy, he had a business and made a lot of money. He had a ranch in Montana and many of us went there...oh, once or twice, once a year at least, and I...we used...I, my wife and I had an airplane, and we used to fly to various things, like troop reunions...and then John, John liked golf, and we went to a lot of golf tournaments.

McDevitt: And did you guys spend...you mentioned golf, how did you spend your free time in Italy? Was there a good amount of correspondence from home? Was there leisure activities? Did you guys have...like a baseball team, or anything like that?

Downs: Oh God, I don't think so, if there was a baseball... no, a lot of that stuff was for the people who were non-flyers, they were there for the duration, we went...we were there for twenty-five missions, so let's say we would get together and open a package from home and have some toasted cheese sandwiches or something like that on the stove that we made...we spent time in the "O" club drinking Italian gin and GI grapefruit juice, which was an abominable drink.

McDevitt: What did that consist of?

Downs: But after a couple of those, you didn't notice anymore.

McDevitt: Yeah, it starts tasting a little better...so were you able to travel the countryside at all? Did you interact with any of the locals?

Downs: Oh, well yes. Yes, I went to church -- I'm a Roman Catholic -- and I went to church, and sure, you get...I didn't really have much close contact, because I was not fluent in Italian. We went to Capri rest camp and after we got back, they...after our adventure -- after we bailed out -- they sent us to Rome, and I did a lot of sightseeing. I went to an opera, you know...I hired a guy and he took me all around town, but if you had a contact with an Italian woman, she was probably a...probably a prostitute. The really nice people had nothing to do with the military. I don't know if that applied to Germans or not, but then...because, you know, they had been allies with the Germans. There was some resentment, and a few people were shot by activists -- Italian activists -- but anyway...are we getting close, or what?

McDevitt: Yes Sir, you mentioned that you guys were shot down leading into 1945, by this time you have kind of gotten comfortable in your roles, I would assume you've been there a while, you've done numerous missions. Can you describe for me the situation in like, February of 1945 when you guys were starting to plan the attack on Moosbierbaum [Austria where gun powder factories, chemical plants and such were located]?

Downs: Oh, well the problem was...at that time, wasn't so much the fighters, because we had taken out quite a bit of the fuel production, but they would...they put up fighters about once a week, but the main problem was flak and the anti-aircraft artillery, and that became more intense as they pulled in the lines and the important targets got to be really covered with flak. At one time, we took along an infantry major -- it was some kind of an exchange program, you know how these bureaucrats operate -- and I don't know what this guy did, but he was...anyway, they put him on.

McDevitt: He's taking up a seat, he's taking up a seat.

Downs: They put him on our crew, and we took him to a target, and we turned in to the target and he said, "Why are you going to fly into that flak?" And we said, "That's where the target is," and he said, "How do they know?" And we said, "They're not stupid, they know the one area is that target, they figured we're that going to go somewhere, we ain't going to bomb no chicken coop." So at that point, he put on the flak suit we had given him...he changed his mind about flak suits. I don't mean to have any bad thoughts about infantry guys. God, they were great people, and God, they took a slug of problems, and I was lucky to be where I was.

McDevitt: But you guys had...you guys dealt with your own things. On the flight that I was talking about, that that mission to Moosbierbaum, were there two guys in your formation, two planes in our formation, that weren't able to take off during that mission?

Downs: As I recall, yes. At least one...it crashed on takeoff, and we had to go up over him.

McDevitt: Was that a pretty common occurrence, to have those technical malfunctions?

Downs: Common occurrence.

McDevitt: Was there a...were there, I guess...because I read some things about the B-24, that the handling would stick in certain positions, and it was just kind of a difficult plane to fly.

Downs: Well you know, I don't know that it was any more of a problem than...an aircraft got much more reliable through the years. Certainly, we had engine problems, I don't know that they...all of them occurred on takeoff. Who knows that that day, they would crash at the end of the runway, and we had to get over them, and we were damn lucky to make it over them? Howell was a hell of a pilot.

McDevitt: Yeah. I mean, because he had to take up the lead, you guys had to take the lead in that formation, and it seemed...have you ever heard of the *Torretta Flyer*, the newspaper, the news bulletin?

Downs: Yeah, yeah.

McDevitt: Yeah, I was reading this story...the story of you guys is in there, in one of the editions, and he was talking about how everything went a little bit awry at the beginning, and you guys carried on the mission, on destroying the fuel for the Germans.

Downs: Right.

McDevitt: So when you guys started, was there...did you have a feeling that that flight was going to be anything different from the norm that day?

Downs: Anything different from the norm...well, I don't know what the norm was.

McDevitt: Like a milk run, did you know it wasn't going to be a milk run?

Downs: Well, you know, in those situations you gotta expect the unexpected. There is no norm. If you start breakfast saying, "the norm", you're going to be in serious trouble, so you had to be ready for whatever the heck happened and think about it...and we had to go into a small island; we had to land off the coast of Yugoslavia, and this PIS [not sure of word] and the runway was very short...you remember, Yugoslavia has mountains. We had to come over the mountains and drop everything: flaps, landing gear, try to get into that runway, and there were a lot of B-24 scraps at the end of that runway. But John made it down there and landed, and we got the brakes on, we smoked a little, but the airplane stopped before we got to the end. But, you know, you can't plan for that. All you can do is be pretty well trained in your position, do your job, and just hope for the best.

You know, perfectly good airmen got blown up over targets, it wasn't because they were not good airmen, it was just that they were unfortunate enough to get in the way of flak.

McDevitt: But you guys had some on that day, on February first. Do you remember Sergeant Metzler?

Downs: Do I need what?

McDevitt: Sergeant Metzler, I believe, was his name.

Downs: Oh, Metzler. Metz, yeah, he was our engineer, yeah.

McDevitt: Can you tell me about what he did? You guys took flak fire going over Austria or going over Vienna, and he -- from what I read -- he did some pretty incredible things. Can you describe for me what was going on when you guys started taking fire?

Downs: Yeah. Well, we got hit pretty bad over the target, we had two engines out and we had tanks -- gasoline tanks -- that were penetrated by flak, and they were leaking pretty badly, and that was going back over a radar ball, we didn't happen to have a radar bomb...I mean a ball turret cover, we had a radar operator, and that thing was cut, and it was arcing, and we were afraid we were going to be a big ball of fire. So Metzler got busy, and he was transferring fuel out of the leaking tanks and into the good tanks as best he could, and he worked hard at it and he was covered in gasoline and so forth, and that pretty much describes what he did...and that wasn't easy, that was a lot of work.

McDevitt: And what was his...he was the engineer, you said?

Downs: Yes, he was an engineer/gunner, he also functioned as the upper gunner. There was an upper turret, he functioned in that area that was up near the copilot.

McDevitt: And when did the call come in that you guys were going down? Can you describe what that was like? When Howell probably came over the radio and said, "Hey, we're going down, get yourself prepared." What was that like?

Downs: Well, we all knew...it wasn't a military secret [laughter], it wasn't anything just the pilot knew, we all knew what was going on and what was going to happen to us, and we decided...and he announced to us that we couldn't get back over the Adriatic, or we could try but he didn't think it was a very good idea...so we would

fly as far as we could down into Hungary and, hopefully, get near or across into the Russian area, and then he said, "Well, get ready to bail out, get your chute..." and we had these chest chutes, you know, wore the harness all the time, and the chute was attached to a couple of D-rings on the harness, and so...and he said, "Downs, go back and make sure they get out. So when I ring the bell, go." And -- we had an alarm bell on the aircraft -- as soon as we got that, I didn't have to encourage those guys, they got out before I knew what the hell was going on. I took my time after; I was a little chicken. I wasn't as brave as those guys. I got out of that thing all right.

McDevitt: And as you're coming down...you said you kinda bailed into some trees as you were going down, how far away...what was the dispersion of the landing? How did you guys regroup. How did you guys get together?

Downs: Well, I'm not sure what the circular area was of our landing, we eventually got together in a small town called Vis...no, no, no, I forget the name of the town right now², but the Russian...the Hungarian people turned us over to the Russians, and we were damn lucky we didn't get shot by the Russians, they were...they were shooting at anything in the air, but we were far enough away that we weren't involved in any of that. I was picked up by some Hungarian people, and I think I may have spent a night or two with them, and then eventually, I ended up in a small-town south of Bucharest, about ten to fifteen miles west of the Danube River. [Sighs] I am nine-two years old; you're wearing me out.

McDevitt: Would you like to take a break? Would you like me to give you...because we're getting near the end, but I...if you'd like to take a fifteen to twenty minute break, if you would like me to give you a call back...however you want, like I said, I love listening to...I love hearing the stories, and this is fascinating.

Downs: Yeah, sure. Call me back in fifteen.

McDevitt: Fifteen, will do. All right, thank you very much, Tom.

Downs: You bet. Bye-bye.

[McDevitt call Downs back]

² Downs' daughter, Cecelia Downs, clarified that the name of the Hungarian city is Pecs.

Downs: Hi.

McDevitt: Hey Tom, how are you doing?

Downs: Who is this?

McDevitt: No Sir, this is Brian McDevitt again, from the Pritzker...

Downs: Oh, okay Brian. Hold on a minute, let me get to another phone.

McDevitt: Sure, do you need a little bit more time, or are you good?

CUT [56:27] – [57:30]

Downs: Okay Brian.

McDevitt: And I'm sorry, I didn't ask, do you prefer Tom or Thomas?

Downs: Oh, any old thing.

McDevitt: Did you have any good nicknames while you were in?

Downs: Not that I know of. I was just called Tom.

McDevitt: And did I give you enough time? Would you like a couple more minutes, or are you good?

Downs: No, no, I'm fine. Let's go.

McDevitt: So, if I remember correctly, you had just gone down in Hungary and had been picked up by the Russians. If you can, can you describe what was your first impression of the Russians?

Downs: Well, we were interviewed by some Russian officers and, like I say, some of the men have some problems, like a broken leg and something like that, and I got to meet the Russian doctor woman, and she was real fluent in English and seemed like a real sharp person. They -- most of them -- were pretty crude people, and you know, they were pulled in off of farms and whatnot, and they didn't really know what toilet paper was all about, but they were likeable enough. I didn't have any problems with them.

McDevitt: And what kind of questions were you just asked? Were you just asked questions about your health, like what had happened, or were they...was it more of an interrogation question?

Downs: You know, to tell you the truth, I don't remember anything about it. I remember appearing before these guys, and I'd be lying if I told you what they said, because I can't remember.

McDevitt: Sure, and was that...was that nurse...was the doctor...was she translating for you guys when they were talking to you, or was there somebody else there? Do you remember that?

Downs: Oh, I guess there was somebody else there.

McDevitt: And did any of your guys speak Russian at all?

Downs: Well, Metzler was a...I think he was of Polish descent, and there's a certain crossover between those two languages, so he was able to converse with some of those folks.

McDevitt: And how long were you with the Russians before you got sent to Bucharest?

Downs: Oh, I guess about a month. They tried to send us sooner, but it didn't work out. They had an old bus and I think it ran on steam or some darn thing, and it wasn't really very reliable, and we had to go over some low mountains and the guy kept shifting out of first... and then back into first, out of first and back into first and I was watching him, and pretty soon he came up with a shift _____ [missing words at 1:01:27.7] and I kicked the window out and dove into the snow. But luckily enough he was on the ball, and he turned the wheel into the snow, because if he turned the other way it would have been a disaster. So we went to the mountains, and then finally the Russians came up with a six by [six by six vehicle?], and that...you know, it was like a half hour over to the Danube, and we went across the Danube on a cable car one at a time, and I got out in the middle of the damn Danube and an enemy 109 [i.e. German aircraft Messerschmitt Bf 109] came along strafing, but I was lucky...strafed the shore, he didn't try so strafe for the box I was in.

McDevitt: I can't even imagine what...

Downs: Yeah, it hardens up your blood a little bit.

McDevitt: [Laughs] So, what was it like when you finally arrived in Bucharest, was it...go on.

Downs: We went to Bucharest by train, and for rations they backed the truck up and they shoveled loaves of bread in and a couple crates of sausages, and the train

was a hospital train, and we were stuck on the back of it, and we were pulled over to the sidings whenever a train was headed for the front -- it was a single track -- and at one point we were close to a town, and it looked like we would be there for a while, so we got permission from the Russians to go into the town, and we meet this lady who was the lady in red and *the lady in red* was the one that turned Dillinger in³. And once she was over there, because she was Romanian and originally from Romania and the feds sent her back there because they were worried that someone would execute her for turning in Dillinger. And she was a nice old lady, and we talked to her, pleasant ...we spent maybe ten or fifteen minutes and got back on the train. We got into Bucharest and the people in Bucharest -- the Russians -- were quite a bit different. They were more...more of a politician type. And at that time, they were bound and determined that Romania and Hungary, those countries, would remain under Russian control, and the communists...So anyway, and we got aircraft come in from the 15th Air Force periodically, and in order to get onto the aircraft, you had to show dog tags and a lot of other things, and you'd better be careful when you were out on the streets at night, because they weren't too careful about who they shot.

McDevitt: So did you guys...what was the housing situation? Where did you guys sleep?

Downs: They put us in a convent. I guess they kicked the nuns out and put us in there. Wasn't too bad. I got some underwear that was...had scabies in it. I caught scabies and it was driving me crazy. I didn't know what had happened, I thought my nerves had gone.

McDevitt: I've had scabies as well, it isn't pleasant.

Downs: Oh you have, so you know what I'm talking about.

McDevitt: Yeah, the sleep situation...it drives you nuts; it drives you wild.

Downs: We got to associate with some of the girls, and we had some fun there in Bucharest. You know how American soldiers are, they'll find the girls wherever they are.

³ Ana Cumpănaș or Sage was born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in 1889, and emigrated to Chicago, becoming a madam there. Cumpănaș informed on gangster, John Dillinger, who was a lover of a friend in an effort to gain US citizenship and avoid deportation. Nonetheless, she was deported to Romania in 1935 and lived there until her death in 1947. She became a cultural icon and known as the "lady in red". This refers to the ostensible color of her outfit worn by Cumpănaș when she turned in Dillinger.

McDevitt: Sure. Yeah, and you got to enjoy what's presented to you, you have to adapt to every circumstance.

Downs: Right.

McDevitt: So how long were you in Bucharest?

Downs: Well, it probably took...like I said, from the time it started, maybe a month to get there, then we were there maybe a month there, and then we spent a month in Hungary.

McDevitt: And...

Downs: One of my buddies down here in IRCC [Indian River Colony Club; a housing development in Florida for retired military officers where Downs and his wife lived for many years] we have a lot of military, ex-military guys, and he was like me, he was a World War II guy, but I stayed in the Reserves, he just got out, and he was in the Air Corps, and he was a navigator, and he got shot up over Berlin, and they flew east and bailed out over the Russian lines, and Ed had a tremendous personality, great guy, he was about ninety-seven when he passed away, and he told me one of the Russians he met over there started corresponding with him about five or ten years ago, but that's beside the point.

McDevitt: What was his name, your friend?

Downs: Ed Alexander.

McDevitt: That's really interesting, when I was reading about your situation I didn't realize there was so much interaction between the Russians and the Americans, and it's just...it's really fascinating to see how things played out, because we were allies, but at the same time, there was still a kind of tentativeness to the relationship. Would you agree with it?

Downs: You betcha. I...well, you know, we had a communist party in America, and anytime any derogatory remarks were made about the Russians, they'd jump right up and make a lot of noise about it. But no, we weren't tight like we were with the English.

McDevitt: Sure, and you mentioned your buddy had correspondence with this Russian gentleman, were you...what was your correspondence like with your family

when you guys were in Italy? Were you guys able to send and receive letters pretty frequently?

Downs: Yes, well...yes, we were.

McDevitt: And what did your family know about you being shot down? Did they have any idea?

Downs: Well, excuse me...my mother received a telegram that I was missing in action, and that...she didn't get anything else until I was able to correspond with her, and that wasn't until after I got back with the 15th Air Force.

McDevitt: Oh, so she didn't hear anything from you until you got back to the States?

Downs: As I recall, yes...no, not back to...the 15th Air Force in Italy.

McDevitt: Oh, okay. Sorry, that was my mistake. Yeah, and how did you get to the 15th Air Force? Was it a train, or did you get picked up by a convoy?

Downs: No, we flew back from Bucharest. They sent out a...what did they pick us up in? A C-47.

McDevitt: And how were you able to correspond? Was it the Russians? Did Russians send communiqués to the United States and let them know they had a certain number of you guys over there?

Downs: Apparently, yeah. Apparently, yeah, they were glad to get rid of us, and I met a lot of the guys who were...on August 1 that low level in Ploesti, they were...you know, they were prisoners of war, and they had some pretty weird stories. And they were...they were lucky they were in a war camp, and then the Russians took it over, and it was better with the Germans I guess, but while the Germans hid them in the war camp; the Romanian royal family kinda looked out for them. If you want to read a nice story...well, not nice, but a history, read that book about the low-level Ploesti raid. I forget the name, but it's very interesting.

McDevitt: The low-level Ploesti...

Downs: Yeah, August the first 1943, they flew [B-]24s and [B-]17s...a couple of groups came down from the 8th, and the 15th was still in Africa...they practiced together and flew the mission together.

McDevitt: And those guys were still there when you were in Bucharest?

Downs: They were just coming out of there, headed back home...the prisoners of war, yeah.

McDevitt: Yeah, I'll definitely look into that book. I'll definitely check that out. I've read a little bit about Ploesti, but I'm not super familiar with it. Yeah, everything in perspective, I mean. you guys were pretty lucky...I mean, you had one guy who had broken his foot on landing, did you guys have any other injuries, other than being a little bruised up?

Downs: Oh, there were just slight, very slight injuries...you know, I think from flak...a scraped elbow or forehead or something. I was lucky, I didn't have any injuries.

McDevitt: And then you were lucky, you dove out of a bus and didn't get injured doing that.

Downs: No.

McDevitt: So when you got back to Bari -- to Italy -- where you guys were, what was the situation like, coming back into...was there like, a debriefing? Did you have to go through an interview process when you returned to Italy, as well?

Downs: I don't remember. I do remember going to the flight surgeon and telling him I thought my nerves were shot, and he diagnosed rabies...scabies.

McDevitt: Not rabies, right.

Downs: They gave me some treatment for that, that's the main thing I remember, then they sent us back to our squadron, and from there we went down to Rome to rest camp, then we went back to the squadron and flew one more mission until the war ended. We went up to the Brenner Pass and bombed up there to try and prevent the Germans from going on up into Europe, and then the war was over, and we came home, and I was out by the end of August, and I started right into college.

McDevitt: So were you in Italy for V-E Day?

Downs: V-E Day...yes. Yes, I was there for Roosevelt's death, and the Italians were very complimentary and sorrowful and all that.

McDevitt: And were you there for Mussolini's death, as well?

Downs: Oh, I guess. I guess so. They... Mussolini was not particularly...of the word, but at least the people around us...it's hard to tell how people feel, but they didn't show any obvious care for the man.

McDevitt: And what was the...can you describe the feeling when you heard the war was over, it was done, and you were going back home?

Downs: Well Brian, I felt very good about it, obviously. Gosh, we all did. We were happy, we were satisfied that it was over, we sure missed flying missions...oh well, we'll have to get along. We flew home on a B-24, and we turned that over to the Air Corps in Massachusetts, and they flew it somewhere and mashed it into aluminum. A lot of...a lot of...some of them went down to Davis-Monthan, and they have a place down there where they have a stockpile of aircraft, B-20...well, I guess they don't have B-29s anymore but B-50, but a lot of the jet planes that might be able to be rejuvenated, reused...are you familiar with that?

McDevitt: The Davis-Monthan?

Downs: Yeah.

McDevitt: Not so much. I was down on an Air Force base in Texas, but I'm not too familiar with Davis-Monthan.

Downs: Yeah, Davis-Monthan was a SAC [Strategic Air Command] base when I was there, and attached to it was a big reservation where they flew in aircraft and they mothballed them...they just dragged them out there on the reservation, and if they thought they might need it, they mothballed it...If they didn't, they scrapped them, and while I was there they created another bomb group, and they took enough B-29s out of the stockpile there and refurbished them and put them back in the service and they created this bomb group.

McDevitt: Was that for Korea?

Downs: Yeah. Korea, yeah. Well, what it really was -- the Korean War -- was on, but what it really was for was -- [General Curtis] LeMay and the Cold War, and when I was down there, I had a target in Russia...we carried the A-bomb, but we really meant business. Never happened, of course. But I would say the General knew what he was doing, and the liberals hated him for it.

McDevitt: Who's the general you're talking about? MacArthur?

Downs: LeMay, General LeMay. He was the head of the SAC Air Force. Strategic Air Command, and he had added up a group over in London. He was quite a guy, tough to work for but...

McDevitt: Did you work directly for him?

Downs: Oh, no. No, no.

McDevitt: Yeah, because...so real quick, if we can I would love to talk to you about your experiences in Korea. I don't know if you...you know, if you would like to continue the interview on another day, if you like to re-schedule for another hour or so, another day, or if you would like to keep going, because...you know, what your recollections, Tom, they are as good and interesting I've had here since I've been here, and I would...because the Korean War was a completely different war.

Downs: Your compliments will get you everywhere...I wasn't in Korea, I was recalled...I was sent to Davis-Monthan, and there I was assigned to a crew, and that crew had a target in Russia, and we carried the A-bomb, and that was our training. I never went to Korea. I had a seat in a B-50 -- the B-50 was a better B-29 -- and that was our mission and...

McDevitt: And would you have had to refuel in the air to get to your target or no?

Downs: Yeah. Yeah, we would refuel, we had to refuel, but I...we essentially...we flew up to Shreveport, and there we picked up the nuclear element, the *Big Boy* was what we carried, and we had jacked up the airplane at Davis- Monthan to load that sucker and then took off and flew to Shreveport unloaded the nuke, which we would then insert into the bomb later on in the mission, then we flew from there up to North Africa, refueling on the way over, and then we refueled and rested in North Africa, then we flew over Turkey, into Russia. This was the planning now, the planning, okay?

McDevitt: Okay.

Downs: We flew over Turkey into Russia, we refueled over Turkey. Dropped the bomb on our target, which was top secret -- always top secret, I had a top-secret clearance -- and then we turned around and came home, but there was a little nebulous of how we were going to get home. But anyway, that's generally the experience during the Korean War.

McDevitt: How did you get selected for that job, Tom?

Downs: I guess because I was good looking and intelligent.

McDevitt: It's a blessing and a curse, right? So did you...what kind of news had you heard about the A-bomb in like, Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of WWII? What did you...how did you feel about having that as your primary mission?

Downs: Well...of course, we hoped we didn't get involved in a nuclear war, but we had to be prepared for one, and so it was...you know, it was pretty obvious those things killed people, turned out that some of the problems with the bomb went as...didn't happen the way they had thought they might, cancer and all that, but anyway, we just...we just felt that we were trained and ready to go, and the better able we were, the less chance there would be for a war.

McDevitt: And was there a...I don't know how much you can speak to this, but as far as in America, how was the feeling about the communist threat at the time? I mean, like, with Truman, after all the peace treaties and everything, how was the...how did you feel about the communist threat?

Downs: Well, the...Uncle Joe [Stalin] was a pretty mean sucker, I don't think he was revered by anybody here, except the communist party. I was...there were some underground people, but I would say that all the folks that I knew were anti-communist and anti-Russian, hoping that nothing would happen. We were now raising our families and working and so forth.

McDevitt: Yeah, because you said you met your wife in the interim period, correct?

Downs: Yeah, I met her in '47, and we married in three months. Yeah, been married ever since.

McDevitt: Three months, that's...how did you meet?

Downs: A blind date.

McDevitt: A blind date?

Downs: Yes.

McDevitt: And what did she do for a living?

Downs: Well, she had graduated from college – DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana -- and she started out as a reporter in California. She moved out there and then came back in the Chicago area, and when I met her, she was an executive secretary for a lady who was the president of some kind of medical association -- I can't remember her name -- and she was a Girl Scout leader, quite a gal.

McDevitt: So you guys met in '47, you married almost immediately, how was it for her...how was the transition to military life, where you'd be kinda...it seemed like she had moved around a lot on her own. She had been to California. How was her transition to military life?

Downs: Well, let me say this [coughs]. She was...I was in the Reserve, and she was upset with me when I got recalled, and we had a couple little kiddies, and I got sent down to an air base in Virginia, and we moved down there, and they moved our furniture down there, and about three weeks later they sent me out to Davis-Monthan 'cause I'd been in heavy bombardment and stuff like that. I think that's what they called it. So anyway, after we got out there and she found out that as an officer I had certain privileges, and she went to the pool and would take care of the kids, and...I don't know, little stuff like that, and there was a great club there, and she got to like it. But then that organization, every two years they had to go either to Guam or England TDY [temporary duty travel] for six months, and that's hell on families...I had a chance to stay in...I could have been a lieutenant colonel sitting in that seat as select lead...select aircraft that I was assigned to, and we talked it over and we decided that it wasn't for us. And so at the end of the two years I said, "goodbye" and went back to the civilian life, but I stayed in the Reserves and from then on a couple of times I went to two weeks of summer camp, but the rest of the time I took correspondence courses and...oh, I went to the last maybe three, four years...I went to drills out at O'Hare but she didn't mind that too much.

McDevitt: And you said...so when you got out what kind of correspondence classes...did you know you wanted to go...did you have an idea that you were going to end up at a place like AT&T, or a communications field?

Downs: Oh, that had nothing to do with the correspondence courses. I'm talking about military correspondence courses.

McDevitt: Oh, okay.

Downs: Yeah. You see, as a reservist, I had to get fifty points a year, and that would get me a good year for retirement, and you got one point for every day you went to Reserve training; you got certain points for taking correspondence courses and that sort of thing.

McDevitt: And did you get to choose whatever one you wanted to take? Was there like a whole list you could select from?

Downs: Pretty much, yeah. And some of them you had to take the previous course before you could take the advanced course.

McDevitt: Was there any one kind of training...of training route you took? Was there one specific subject you enjoyed more than the others?

Downs: No, not really. I did 'em to get my good years in. I had to travel periodically on my job, and I hauled those along, and instead of sitting down in a bar, I worked on those courses, and I could have probably been a six-star general after all those courses [laughter]...but anyway...

McDevitt: Sorry, go ahead.

Downs: But I, you know...I don't remember that much about them, they were all okay. You would take the course and there was some kind of examination that you would fill out and send in, and if you passed it you got credit for the course. And it probably still works that way, I don't know.

McDevitt: Yeah, we have...they're pretty similar -- the kind of things we do -- you can select...you're supposed to do a certain amount. I was never in the Reserves, but when you're enlisted, they encourage taking those kinds of courses, and it's proctored by a higher-ranking officer, and they'll go through the process and tell you whether you passed or failed.

Downs: Yeah, but this didn't lean towards a degree, these were military courses.

McDevitt: And did you go in as a reservist? Did you go back to college, or did you start working in the civilian world right away?

Downs: When I got out after WWII...I was out at the end of August, and I was back at college about two weeks later...in college two weeks later on the GI bill. And I got my four years in as an engineer, and it wasn't easy because we were married and we had a couple of little kiddies, and...but finally I got out...I mean I graduated,

worked out for me, I did all right, I don't have any regrets. I'm glad I stayed in the Reserves. I think I was doing my duty for the country, and certainly they've been very good to me.

McDevitt: Do you...do you think your military service helped prepare you for the struggles that you had in civilian life?

Downs: Did it help me? You know, you can say the same thing about college, did it help me? Well, I...you know, as an engineer, what you learn is to think through problems, and sometimes the answer is not very clear, so you have to approach it from a different angle or viewpoint, and if you learn to do that you can usually solve most of the problems that occur as an engineer, and that's the main contribution that any kind of education provides.

McDevitt: And so, you have...if I'm correct, you have five children, is that correct?

Downs: Four.

McDevitt: Four children. Did any of them go on to serve in the military at all?

Downs: No.

McDevitt: No. And you have four children, six grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren, is that...that's right, right?

Downs: Yeah, yeah.

McDevitt: And is there anything you would want them to gain from your story, like passing it forward? Is there anything you would like to just pass on to them as they mature and come up in this ever-changing world that we live in? I mean, things from the 1940s to now, I mean it's such a fast-paced world nowadays, is there anything you would like to share with them that you hope they can garner from your stories of service?

Downs: Well, number one, I don't preach to them. If they ask me something I try and give them an answer. I think we live our lives well enough that they watch us, that they observe us, and they try and emulate what they see. Most of my grandchildren have gone to college and have done pretty well and, you know, my wife is a great example for them, she went to school, and she graduated in three years because she couldn't afford to go for four. She went to summer school, she took extra courses...that sort of thing but preaching, no, I try...one of

my grandsons, he's in college right now, and...he's my son in Aurora, Tom's son -- Sean is Tom's son -- and he's going to college, and he's a pretty smart kid, and I brought him down here...And I'm friends with a couple of three-star guys, one of them Air Force, one of them Army. And Sean to visit us, and I got a hold of these two fellas, and I said, "Would you interview my grandson, or can they interview you, I mean," and so I took him over to those gentlemen, and real likable guys, and I wanted him to see what successful people were like, and they sat with him and talked with him, answered all the questions that he had, and I kinda prompted them, and it was great...I thought maybe he might get interested in the military, but he wasn't.

McDevitt: Well Tom, is there anything else you that would like to add to this interview...you would like to add that you feel we didn't cover? Is there...?

Downs: Well, there's a lot of personal life that I don't want to include in there... No, the answer is no.

McDevitt: Well then, on behalf of myself, first off, and the Pritzker Military Museum, as well, thank you very much for your service to our country and for taking the time out of the day, I really appreciate it.

Downs: You bet, anytime. Thank you.

McDevitt: Thank you, you take care, Tom.

Downs: You bet, take care. Bye-bye.